

Racing to restore Jesse Owens park

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OAKVILLE — More than a decade ago, after James Pinion and the U.S. Olympic Committee president met, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park development moved to the fast track.

Pinion met in 1994 with then-USOC President Leroy Walker in Birmingham and showed him a miniature model of the planned park. The plans persuaded Walker to reroute the Olympic Torch through Oakville, the birthplace of the 1936 Olympic great, and with the torch came more than \$2 million in funds. Pinion, Thurman White and the park board were able to accomplish in six years what would have taken more than 10 years.

A museum, statue and replica of Jesse Owens' birthplace are at the park today; however, U.S. Olympic Committee Chief Operating Officer Chip Gregson did not know that. He was at the park Thursday for the presentation of a corporate check for improvement to the facility. Though not sure about what, if any, help the USOC could give the park, Gregson said he likes what he saw.

"This is too good an opportunity to pass up," he said. "I think from the U.S. Olympic Committee we can figure out some way to deepen our partnership with the park and with the community here. And I think there are ways we can be productive. We just need to get the right people sitting around the table and figure out how we do it. Jesse Owens' legacy is too powerful not to do something like that, so we can get the image out there, and the symbolism out there in front of more and more young Americans."

Gregson was there for Hamp-

ton Hotels' presentation of a \$38,200 check for improvements. The chain, owned by Hilton Hotels, donated the money as part of its Save-A-Landmark program, a response to surveys that show 80 percent of travelers want to visit landmarks. Hampton Inn uses its employees from hotels in the community to renovate U.S. landmarks.

More than a star

Jesse Owens was more than an Olympic star, Gregson said.

"His legacy is well beyond Olympic achievement," he said. "It symbolizes many, many things that are good about America and fit into the American ideal. His history after he became an Olympic star and right up to his death is one of contributing to the nation, and giving back to the youngsters, and giving back to the community, so that other people could develop in his image. I can't think of a better time to do that than right now when we're leading up to the Winter Olympics in Italy, and in two more years we'll be in Beijing in 2008."

Owens' daughters, Marlene Owens Rankin, Beverly Owens



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Photo by Robin
Weiner

Jesse Owens' daughters, Marlene Owens Rankin, Beverly Owens Prather and Gloria Owens Hemphill, in front of a statue of their father at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville on Thursday at a gathering to pay tribute to his legacy.

Prather and Gloria Owens Hemphill, all of Chicago, attended. Hemphill said she becomes teary-eyed whenever she returns to Berlin, because the occasion was so important to her father. Films of him winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics and those of his triumphant return to the United States still amaze her. Those films are available for viewing at the Jesse Owens Museum.

"I just can't seem to believe it, and I've seen it many a time," she said. "It becomes more real, and it's just hard for me to describe."

Hemphill said her father would have loved the museum and statue of his likeness in Oakville.

"He would have felt so proud and so good about this," she said. "This is such a special place. I can't wait to bring my grandson here so he can see this. He's 4, but he knows who (Jesse Owens) is. It's just wonderful."

For more information on the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, visit www.jesseowensmuseum.org. For more information on the Save-A-Landmark program, visit www.hamptonlandmarks.com.